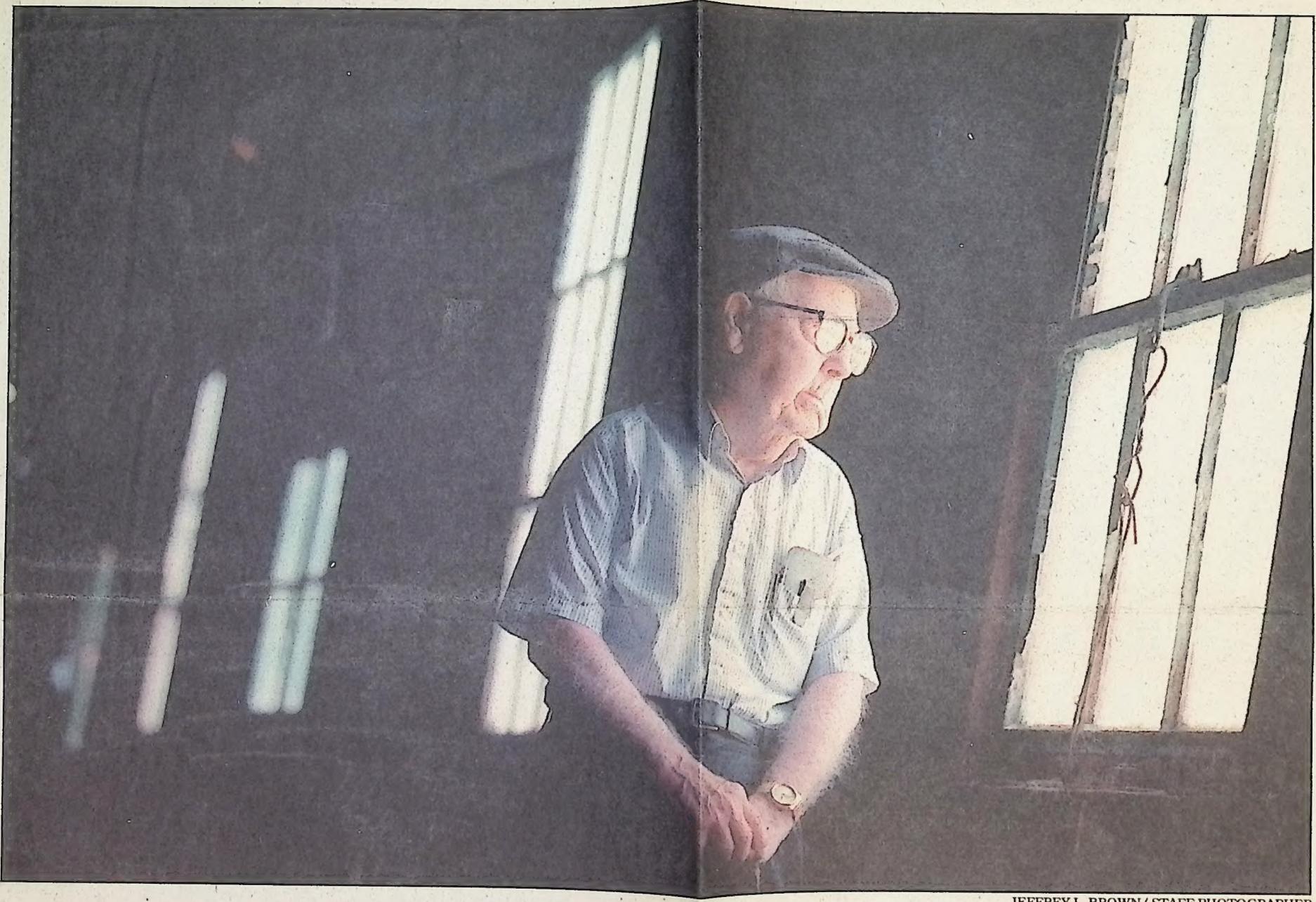


War's horror unleashed



JEFFREY L. BROWN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

55 years after a deadly catastrophe, memories of the carnage still fresh

By Nick Reiher
ASSISTANT CITY EDITOR

On his deathbed several years ago, Francis Gaffney sometimes mumbled something that puzzled his granddaughter, Susie, who was helping care for him. But the words also troubled her mom, Phyllis Roa, Gaffney's daughter.

"He would tell her, 'I can't believe the FBI thought I did it,'" Roa remembered. "My daughter thought he was hallucinating." Roa knew better, but at that point she was keeping a secret that her father had filed



David Tunstall revisits the loading area of the reconstructed arsenal plant for the first time in 55 years. Tunstall, the U.S. Army press officer during the 1942 arsenal explosion, shares his memories with Herald News columnist John Whiteside on page A 4. At left, the explosion killed 48 workers and left the facility in shambles.

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away for some 55 years.

Roa remembered that day in June 1942 when her father was about to start work for the Joliet Arsenal, then known as the Elwood Ordnance Plant. He wasn't thrilled about the prospect of being locked in a plant that made high explosives for the war effort, she said, but he had been laid off as a welder for another company. They needed money.

He was ordered to start the night shift at the plant June 4. But the day before, Gaffney got a call from his previous employer who told him the company got a war contract. He was back on the payroll. He quickly called officials at the ordnance plant to tell them he didn't need the job and wouldn't be in to work.

A day later, an explosion broke windows throughout the Joliet area and could be felt as far away as Waukegan and Hammond. Cars were thrown from roadways like die-cast toys. People in Ann Arbor, Mich., said they even heard the blast. Some who had felt their homes shake thought it was an earthquake. Those who looked out their windows saw a plume of fire streaking up into the early morning sky to the south. They knew it was the ordnance plant, some 15 miles from Joliet.

In a flash, a section of the plant's loading area disintegrated. A staging area off Group 2, one of four compounds where railway cars rolled up to lines where high explosive bombs of all types were made. That night, the workers in Group 2 were loading mines and TNT-laden fuses they had made onto the rail cars. Two rail cars pulled up alongside the 321-by-66-foot stone-and-steel building also were blown to dust, as were the men closest to the blast.

The time was 2:42 a.m. June 5. Wit-

nesses said they actually heard two explosions, a smaller one followed by a much larger one just a few seconds later. Army officials said the first probably was caused by a fuse detonating in the assembly area, and the second was the rail cars loaded with mines and fuses going up. No one is sure what caused the explosions. The Army report was inconclusive, although speculation is that one of the crew just screwed up.

Army officials were more concerned at the time with keeping up production. "Keep 'Em Shooting" was the motto at the ordnance plant. Rumor was that the bombs dropped on Tokyo by Gen. Jimmy Doolittle and his squadron were made in Elwood. Maybe they were also being used in the battle over Midway Island, America's first major counterattack of the war, that was raging in the Pacific at the time of the explosion.

Those kinds of rumors helped keep up morale, helped keep production going no matter what. Minutes after the blast, some 20,000 workers in the hundreds of other buildings on the 23,500-acre ordnance plant initially were ordered into bomb shelters. But after no signs of sabotage were found, and all their IDs checked out OK, they were back at their stations.

"It is the duty and aim of this plant to get as much ammunition to the soldiers and sailors as possible," said Capt. D.A. Tunstall, spokesman for the plant in a June 5, 1942, *Herald News* article. "And nothing can stop the plant from operation."

Army officials said the explosion affected only 15 percent of the total output of the plant. The arsenal, which started churning out munitions on Aug. 30, 1941, was designed so that an explosion in one area wouldn't affect production at other buildings. Buildings were set a couple of hundred yards apart and fortified with walls made of concrete blocks 6 to 8 inches thick.

As such, when the loading area in Group 2 exploded, much of the noise and surrounding damage went out to the northeast, the part of the building

where the blast occurred. People in buildings on the far side of the blast only a few hundred yards away said they were awakened by relatives in Joliet who heard and felt the explosion.

Louise Gibson said her late husband, Robert, was a foreman in the ill-fated Group 2 compound. "I hadn't wanted him to go to work that night," she said. "I had a funny feeling about it, but he had to take two other fellows to work with him."

When she heard the explosion, she knew it was the ordnance plant. A few years earlier, her family lost their 10-acre farm in Symerton when the federal government claimed the land for the arsenal.

"They gave us \$3,000," she said. "We had a hard time finding anything in Joliet for that price."

Now she realized she may have lost her husband as well. But as dawn broke, a friend called to say her husband was alive but deaf from the explosion. A while later, Army officials brought him home, his ribs heavily taped. "My dad asked my mom to cut some of the tape because it was too tight," said Edwin Gibson, one of Louise and John's sons.

Louise Gibson later learned that her husband had stepped out of the building for some reason before the explosion. The heavily fortified walls saved his life.

Army officials worked quickly to move the debris out, fill in the massive craters caused by the blast and get a new assembly line up and running. They would do that within 30 days, but there were signs of hurry. The new structure, still in use through the 1980s, was fortified with wooden trusses instead of the steel ones gnarled by the explosion.

But on that June morning, Army officials still were sifting through rubble and dust for any signs of the living. Ambulance personnel from area communities that heard the blast and saw

the flames were turned away at the gates. Instead, the injured were taken to a 100-bed hospital on the base.

Roa remembers going to eighth grade at St. Peter's Lutheran School that day. On the Second Avenue bus from her Ingalls Park home, they passed a funeral home surrounded by vehicles from which bodies were being removed and carried into the building. "I began to cry for all the families that had not been as fortunate as ours," she said.

The dead, or what was left of them, were taken to funeral homes for services during the next few days. The only person allowed into the massive arsenal was Dr. E.A. Kingston, Will County coroner. And even he needed help. Army officials came to John Gibson's home and drove him, aching ribs and all, back to the plant so he could help identify bodies.

After several days, Army officials came up with the final count: 48 dead, 36 of whom were identified. Twelve missing and presumed dead, a dozen or so others injured. The government doled out \$4,400 in workman's compensation to each of the families of the dead.

Others still had physical injuries, some had emotional ones, the kind that last a lifetime.

If he hadn't gotten that call the day before, Francis Gaffney would have been working the night shift in Group 2 early June 5. Not long after the explosion, two FBI agents came to his Joliet door asking why he hadn't started work at the ordnance plant as scheduled. He explained his former employers called him back to work instead.

They confirmed that with the former employer, Roa said, and at the time, her family didn't resent the intrusion. "Our country, after all, was fighting a war," she said.

"But my father never talked about it again. Neither did I. I just didn't think I should, even when my daughter brought it up. But now she realizes he wasn't hallucinating. He was remembering after all these years."



JEFFREY L. BROWN

This explosives manufacturing facility was rebuilt less than 30 days after the explosion that killed 48 people in 1942.